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SUBJECT: THAILAND POLITICAL UPDATE: HUGE ANTI-THAKSIN RALLY
BOISTEROUS BUT PEACEFUL

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Alex A. Arvizu, reason 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Anti-Thaksin protesters gathered in full-force this morning on March 14, in far greater numbers than the demonstrations of March 5, and marched peacefully from Sanam Luang to Government House. The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and the Dharma Army have both vowed to remain there until PM Thaksin resigns. Thaksin's tractor-riding supporters from the Northeast did not materialize. In response to the morning's activities, the Cabinet moved their meeting to the Health Ministry in Nontaburi, in the outskirts of Bangkok. The Cabinet meeting reportedly concluded with the elevation of Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Chidchai from third to first DPM. Meanwhile, there are indications the Election Commission may disqualify up to 200 candidates for the April 2 elections -- considerably more than had been anticipated. Thaksin, meanwhile, is conveniently on the campaign trail in friendly territory in northeast Thailand. End Summary.

THE REHEARSAL

¶2. (C) Some 60-80,000 anti-Thaksin demonstrators gathered peacefully, but loudly, at Sanam Luang on March 13, the evening before the march, to hear Sondhi and others recite the familiar charges against PM Thaksin: looting the country, selling out the country and undermining democracy. The crowd was also treated to a Chinese opera spoof of Thaksin, a poem addressed to Thaksin's children, urging them to persuade their father to resign, and musical appeals for action reminiscent of the 1960s. Most of the speeches stressed the importance of showing the opposition's strength on this morning's march to Government House.

THE SHOW

¶3. (C) A sizable crowd -- estimated at over 150,000 demonstrators -- marched from Sanam Luang, through the Democracy Monument, to Government House at daybreak. Peaceful and more sedate compared to their previous march nine days ago, the crowd grew more passionate as the morning wore on. Discipline and order characterized the large procession, which stretched over a number of large intersections but still obeyed its organizers to allow for traffic to pass through. Ages ranging from the young to the old, much of the crowd looked to be about middle-aged from both the countryside and Bangkok itself. People waved Thai flags along with anti-Thaksin paraphernalia in Thai, English and Chinese high in the air and many smiled at pedestrians as they passed by. Signage included the usual protesting of Thaksin's lack of ethics, the Shin Corp sale, and the FTA -- but it should be noted that they are getting more coarse, including curse words in English, an ocean of swastikas, and even one with a picture of a man defecating on Thaksin's head.

¶4. (C) The police also appeared relaxed, and chatted amongst each other. Though the crowd seemed twice as large as on March 5, the number of police did not noticeably increase. One of the police officers commented to an Embassy employee that they were not worried, but "at ease."

WE'RE HERE TO STAY!...WE THINK

¶5. (C) Both the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) coordinator, Suriyasai Katasila, and Dharma Army's own Chamlong have declared that the protesters will remain in front of the Government House until PM Thaksin resigns. That said, Suriyasai also noted that they would reevaluate the situation daily to assess the plausibility of doing so. (Comment: This is not the first time the PAD has promised to remain at Government House. They had made a similar announcement before the March 5 demonstrations, but then decided to turn back and set up camp at Sanam Luang afterwards. End Comment.)

WHERE ARE THE TRACTORS?

16. (C) Following yesterday's uncertainty regarding whether pro-Thaksin supporters from TRT strongholds from the Northeast would ride their tractors in to cut off the protesters, today they were a "no show." There are varying reports claiming that the Northeastern farmers either suddenly withdrew their support for Thaksin after being swayed by the PAD, or that the police or government asked them to turn back. (Comment: We believe the latter to be more likely. End Comment.)

AS FOR THE CABINET...

17. (C) Opting to skip the excitement at Government House, the Cabinet reportedly convened its meeting at the Ministry of Health in Nonthaburi today. Among the topics for discussion was the reported elevation of DPM Pol General Chidchai from third to first Deputy PM. This would make Chidchai the next-in-line successor to become Caretaker Prime Minister should Thaksin for whatever reason step down. This decision to promote Chidchai coincidentally coincides with unconfirmed reports that Thaksin and the TRT have devised a "tactical retreat" by which Thaksin would resign from premiership while Chidchai would succeed him. The PAD has come out to reject this arrangement as they claim that it would only make Thaksin the "invisible hand" behind the scene. Another theory holds that Thaksin wants Chidchai to be in charge in Bangkok while Thaksin campaigns upcountry, and will have Chidchai (who is in charge of the Ministry of Justice) impose an emergency decree. (Note: This seems unlikely in the current environment. End note.)

WHAT ABOUT THE ELECTION?

18. (SBU) According to some reports, a source at the Election Commission (EC) noted that at least 200 election candidates from the smaller, little-known political parties would most likely be disqualified for the April 2 election. Most of these candidates would be found ineligible because they would have either: 1) been members of the parties they represent for less than 90 days before the election, or 2) retained membership of more than one political at the same time. This figure at 200 is considerably higher than anticipated. If true, it will add to TRT's pre-election woes.

MORE MONEY PROMISED

19. (C) In a separate decision, the Cabinet has just approved a pay raise for State-Owned Enterprise (SOE) employees, retroactive from October 2005. Though this proposal had been made previously, it was originally turned down by the Cabinet as they cited that a caretaker government should not make any commitments. It should be noted that an estimated 30,000 SOE employees joined the demonstrations today.

110. (C) On the farmer's front, Dr. Twatchai, the Secretary General of the Thai Banker's Association (TBA) stated to Econoff that the government will soon announce a restructuring of small farmer debt in the amount of baht 2.2 billion (USD 56.1 million). This "Agriculture Rehabilitation Fund" will be seen as another financial boost to rural farmers.

COMMENT

111. (C) Today's massive rally in front of Government House was boisterous but peaceful. It's unclear how long they intend to stay. But in a sense, the "showdown" at Government House never took place; not only was Thaksin out of the capital, but the cabinet itself met at a location in the outskirts of Bangkok. The political machinations at both sides continue to rivet the public's attention. Interestingly, several TV stations broadcast live, extensive coverage of today's events. End Comment.
BOYCE